

# Child Care

“They are the only ones who have time for us.”

— college students According to the National Women’s Law Center, a third of all women who left their jobs during the pandemic reported feeling their companies were not supportive of them.<sup>1</sup> The pressure put on women to balance work and childcare was cited as leading to disproportionate levels of strain among workers,<sup>2</sup> and it created a huge, post-pandemic upheaval. It remains for the society and larger culture to recognize this unmet need that has been continually disregarded, but that the pandemic thrust front and center stage. Economists now say universal child care in America is the single, biggest need that would ease the pressure on women trying to balance work and home life so that mothers can care for the young, who are much in need of that care, and return to the workforce, where they are also needed, if they want to do so.<sup>2a</sup> The difficulty of drawing female workers back into the marketplace overlooks the root of a problem that persists even today. Work in the home is not and never has been compensated work. Caring for children, overseeing school projects and monitoring homework, shopping for groceries, cooking meals, making doctor appointments, driving children to practice sports and other projects, cleaning a house, washing, drying, and ironing clothes, addressing sales and other phone calls, coordinating with relatives, care-giving for senior parents, and now trying to oversee social media, etc.—none of this has been considered “real” work. It is, rather, just what people—primarily women—do at home. I once asked students about the share of labor in their homes. Most said both parents worked outside the home, but their mothers also did most of the work at home. This is not to say there are not men who do this work and/or work alongside *with* the women. But it is what most students reported. Steven Colbert offers a succinct explanation of Father’s Day: “it’s a lot like Mother’s Day, but the mother organizes both.” Tom McFarland, a Missouri resident left his job during the pandemic. He told PBS reporter Paul Solman “I’m currently working,

I’m just working as a parent at home.<sup>3</sup> He explained, “Childcare is very expensive and hard to acquire right now....it turned out to be where childcare was...going to take up our whole paycheck, so I chose to become a stay-at-home parent.”<sup>4</sup> Solman is not surprised McFarland’s wife supports the family on her salary as a veterinarian because, he says, today women keep “outpacing men in college degrees, and thus in earning potential.”<sup>5</sup> But now that males affirm the job being done, there seems to be little question that stay-at-home parenting really does involve work. In January, 2021, twenty-five million people quit their jobs. Half a year later, at the end of July, 10.9 million jobs opened in medical support, hospitality, and service industries.<sup>6</sup> Restaurants and hotels in particular experienced a shortage of workers. If we consider the wages of housekeepers, hospitality, food workers, other service industries, and child care, the persistent lack of fair pay for any work that resembles work done at home is all the more easily overlooked because these kinds of lower-paying jobs are often still considered “women’s work.” It was not only less regard for the work done by women. Midway through 2021, many were afraid to go back to work due to Covid-19 and/or did not feel comfortable sending their kids back to school. The American Rescue Plan Act (ARP) had made huge sums of money available for schools to reopen safely, rescue jobs, and for help with daycare by means of child care tax credits.<sup>7</sup> Vaccines for children neared approval before the end of 2021. But six million women had been infected with Covid, and more than 700,000 children under eighteen had died.<sup>8</sup> After schools closed, twenty million women—many of them single parents—had no choice but to leave jobs to care for those at home.<sup>9</sup> By late 2021, 39% of caregivers, mostly women, left their jobs to care for a loved one either because they could not get reliable and quality care for the young or because they opted to care for those most in need, to be home for loved ones who were vulnerable and/or traumatized<sup>10</sup> Many women retired from work when they saw the trauma their children experienced being out of school, learning only from screens, and missing their friends and person-to-person contact, as well as the trauma of later returning to school and perhaps feeling behind. In 2020, WRAL anchor Kathryn Brown had left her job as a TV reporter and explained that working from home had shown her what she was missing as the parent of young children: “Before COVID, I didn’t really know what I was missing, and once I realized what I was missing ... I couldn’t go back to not having that.”<sup>11</sup>

Caring for elderly parents is also an important reason many workers need more flexible time for work at home.<sup>12</sup> According to the latest Census Bureau data, “A million more people age 65 and older,” most who were living only on Social Security “fell into poverty, raising the percentage to 10.3%, from 8.9% in 2020.”<sup>13</sup> A number of baby-boomers took early retirement to care for family members such as grandchildren and others who had become addicted to opioids and/or feared the use of fentanyl. Almost half of 18-29 year olds were living with parents, either to save money or due to lack of affordable housing.<sup>14</sup> Nurturing the next generation of human beings has not been recognized or valued on par with economic needs and work done outside the home. The current cost and importance placed on child care shows society places a lower value on those whose work is caring for children than on those whose work is in the marketplace. We might ask, why is the work of raising the next generation—our young people—valued less than economic gains from work done in the marketplace in order to accumulate more material possessions? Today, many children do not have a stay-at-home parent due to single parent households or wages so low that both parents must work. In order to afford child care in 2022, families considered sacrifices, including reducing hours at work (38%), changing jobs (27%), or leaving the workforce (24%).<sup>15</sup> A survey by Care.com found the value of caring for a child is worth more than \$10,000 a year: “more than half of families (57%) spent that much on child care in 2020; 59% plan to spend more in 2021.”<sup>16</sup> Working families need Child Care tax credits in order for one parent to remain working in the home. Or, if both parents choose to work, then the tax credits are needed towards payment of whatever different options a community offers for child care. But not all providers accepted the Federal tax credits that helped to offset the low income of some parents early in the pandemic, and those credits have now expired.<sup>17</sup> In 2021, child care cost on average \$12k year per child. But yearly figures differ and vary from one area to the next. In August, 2023, the price of child care was said to have “risen steadily in recent years with the average annual cost ranging from \$4,000 to over \$24,000 in some parts of the country.”<sup>18</sup> Child care is reportedly 63% more expensive than in 2019, before the pandemic; 31% of parents have second jobs to pay for childcare, which leaves them even less time with their own children.<sup>19</sup>

According to Lisa Hamilton, president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which since 1990 has tracked this and other issues around child well-being in an annual Kids Count report, the cost of child care has increased 220% in the last three decades.<sup>20</sup> The American Rescue Plan increased pay for childcare workers, 20% of whom leave after one year, and if one lives in a major city, costs more than \$17 thousand per year. The president is working to restore the full Child Tax Credit—which gave tens of millions of parents some breathing room and cut child poverty in half to [its] lowest level in history.”<sup>21</sup> If as planned, the Biden administration caps how much families pay for child care as part of the Child Care & Development Block Grant program, “about 80,000 families would pay less for child care because of the cap. The rule would also waive payments for families who are at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty level.”<sup>22</sup> According to a 2023 study released by the nonprofit Council for a Strong America, issues with child care costs the U.S. economy \$122 billion a year through lost earnings, productivity and tax revenue.<sup>23</sup> Trying to rally support for renewing federal tax care, Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) said, “Federal child care fund expired last month—threatening to make a bad situation worse. Childcare holds up every sector of our economy, and it could not be more important.”<sup>24</sup> Childcare is, therefore, an issue that affects all segments of society: women, families, children, the elderly, child care workers, and the government itself. If women are to have a choice to work, the fact that nearly a quarter of families are considering one parent leaving the workforce to help with child care underscores the urgent need for quality child care.<sup>25</sup> Alternating schedules—one parent works days and one parent works nights—is the way many families make enough money to handle their child care responsibilities, but those schedules come at the expense of spending time together, says Julie Kashen, senior fellow and director for women’s economic justice at The Century Foundation.<sup>26</sup> Hamilton states parents unable to work consistently due to childcare issues create “financial instability in their households.

And we know that children don’t thrive when they grow up in poverty.”<sup>27</sup> Currently, more than half of childcare staff are women of color. Most receive no benefits and are paid \$12 hour.<sup>28</sup> If we have simply outsourced the work of caring for our young to those whom we pay at extremely low levels, that shift again shows the nearly negligible value placed on work done in the home—or rather, work done primarily by women. The country has long been relying on a market to support “really low wages and devalued work for a public good.” But as Amna Nawaz points out, “We want children in day care to feel loved—not merely a function of the market place.”<sup>29</sup> After all, the technology by which virtual imperialism expands is only too happy to keep selling us more ways for our children to become ever more dependent on technologies and the addiction to entertainment those technologies make possible. When women were needed in the work force during WWII, they were sold rhetoric such as “women can do anything a man can.”<sup>30</sup> Child care centers were created across the nation because Congress made clear that “respectable women should be working to help us with the war effort.”<sup>31</sup> Today, women make up half the American work force. If their productivity is now needed in the marketplace, then we also need to recognize that caregiving is equally needed in homes across the nation—that place where work is also done—albeit primarily by women. Families and careers need not be either-or decisions. Even before the pandemic, I began thinking of this while teaching transfer-bound, community college students. On the first days of classes, I had students write brief introductions to assess their approximate writing skills. When I gave a prompt such as “Tell me about yourself and whom you admire,” for years students wrote predictable responses that included mention of firemen, doctors, sports and celebrity figures, and an occasional world or social leader. Over the years, a couple of students mentioned grandparents as those whom they most admired; in subsequent years, a few more students mentioned them. When I sensed a pattern among students answering their grandparents were among those they most admired, I wondered why and asked that question to different classes, different semesters. The responses students gave were markedly similar: “They are the only ones who have time for us.” These were not grade schoolers, but rather college students who still felt a need for some adult guidance, some mentoring, as they were negotiating their ways through life.

Some were already young—and mostly single—parents themselves. Others had not found a career path that gave them a sense of belonging in society. Many were confounded by the replacement of so many human connections with digital ones, even as they backgrounded their human relationships to stay on top of the technological changes. Many others experienced loneliness and became withdrawn. Clearly, there is a need for more caregiving in our young people’s lives. To some extent, we used to learn how to talk to others from playing at parks, running errands with parents, interacting with people in real time, sleep-overs, and other everyday encounters. When young people go outside and meet other kids to play with, they learn with their senses and other skills how to get along, what makes something fun, what does not work, when the same thing is no longer satisfying, and what to change to make something work better. This sensory learning is invaluable, but it has been more and more replaced by too-busy parents handing even to the very young, cell phones, computer games, and/or other technological gadgets with which to keep the very young “occupied.” The self-taught, intuitive learning of many young people has been weakened and is more and more often replaced by friendly, digital “assistants” all too eager to “help” these young lives. U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy writes as a parent and physician of his deep concern “that some of the challenges and obstacles that this generation of young people face—the ubiquity of technology platforms, loneliness, economic inequality, and progress on issues such as racial injustice and climate change—are unprecedented and uniquely hard to navigate.”<sup>32</sup> One group of people who often help the young transition to the adult world are coaches. Walter Isaacson, interviewed Kent Babb, author of *Across the River: Life, Death and Football in an American City*, and Nick Foster, head football coach at St. Augustine High School in New Orleans about coaching in a troubled part of New Orleans and about caring enough to give the kids an experience of something different from what their backgrounds had offered them.<sup>33</sup> Babb says the coaches teach something “bigger than ... football and our success on the field ... that is, honesty.”<sup>34</sup> He says coaches “teach these kids to know how to trust and who to trust.”<sup>35</sup> His claim is remarkable since trust is an American value that has been notably damaged during the pandemic. **Coach Foster remarks that** “New Orleans had got to the point now where these kids got easy access to a gun and, you know, they don’t even know how to handle altercations...We try to change them off the field about how to handle a confrontation, how to talk things out.”<sup>36</sup>

Babb observes: “Football is the thing that gets these kids through the door. It’s about character, it’s about communication, it’s how you talk to your fellow person.” He explains one young man, Joe, “because he played for Edna Karr High and because he had these coaches, he knew who to go to and they helped him get out of what could have been a life-changing and possibly life ending jam.”<sup>37</sup> Babb says young people “learn there is an office full of adults who won’t give up on them.”<sup>38</sup> In a new normal, that is the kind of coaching—and adult support—we should want all young people to have and to grow from because all of them deserve it. Then Kent Babb discusses the effect of another crisis, one not unlike the Covid pandemic and the political polarization it has led to. He sees the “extraordinarily territorial” city of New Orleans as “a place where people grow up on a certain block, in a certain neighborhood and they don’t always leave that block and they certainly don’t trust somebody who doesn’t live on that block.”<sup>39</sup> Babb compares his vision of New Orleans to the mindset of many young people when he first meets them. On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast as a category 3 storm with winds as high as 120 mph. Babb recalls, “You had to learn how to trust. You had to learn how to rely on these people that didn’t sound like you or...look like you. They weren’t from where you are from, but suddenly you are on the same team.”<sup>40</sup> The value of parents and adults, in homes and our communities, who are available to respond with love and compassion to our young people, who have their backs and won’t give up on them, and who provide a kind of life-affirming example of being on the same team with people of all backgrounds who are still negotiating their ways through a complex and difficult world is invaluable. Which is not to say any adult has a right to this role. Clearly the values parents want passed on are legacies of what matters most to them, and there is always the possibility of abuse—abuse of one’s position over and/or power to influence young people. But possible abuse is yet another argument for the presence of more qualified care-giving in the homes, schools, and training places of our young. In 2021, Judy Woodruff spoke with Christine Brennan, sports reporter for *USA Today*, about the abuse of young gymnasts training for the Olympics.

Brennan tells Woodruff “people knew this was going on over two decades ago and questions angrily why “no one [was] listening to these young women?”<sup>41</sup> Two decades is a mind-boggling amount of time for young women to have endured being abused and yet have no one noticing or listening to them! Brennan points to “the power dynamic involved.” Yes, there are the dreams of young athletes and their being too young to know better. But the real tragedy is “no one looked out for these kids...no one was able to speak out for them, and...they just felt so hampered from speaking out themselves.”<sup>42</sup> The athletes have now settled with the FBI over two agents failing to adequately investigate athletes’ reports of abuse and sexual misconduct by Larry Nasser.<sup>43</sup> But did the athletes not tell other adults—anyone else? Consider the young gymnasts who themselves have since questioned why not even one adult became aware of their needs. Did it not occur to anyone that young gymnasts left alone might warrant someone volunteering to monitor their care and provide oversight of the training activities? Did no adult even *question* behavioral changes in one of these young girls? In eating habits? Sleeping habits? Mood changes? Or was it just assumed, as happens much too often, that while the young are burdened with learning “how to build friendships, keep up with school, deal with new technologies, and lay the foundation of a personal values system,” somehow child-care is work that is the responsibility of ... someone else?<sup>44</sup> “Susan Gale Perry, CEO, Child Care Aware of America, says “the good news is that the number of child care programs across the country has really rebounded to pre-pandemic levels.”<sup>45</sup> She calls the good news “direct result of a \$50 billion dollar Congress made and approved childcare relief funds.”<sup>46</sup> These funds helped to keep child care centers operating and the \$24 billion dollars in pandemic relief approved by Congress in 2021 (American Rescue Plan) was a lifeline for basic daycare to remain open and staffed.<sup>47</sup> But the funds expired at the end of September, 2023,” and Congress has repeatedly failed to pass long-lasting reform.<sup>48</sup> “Senate Democrats have introduced a bill to extend child care stabilization funding for five years, but the measure doesn’t have support from Republicans.”<sup>49</sup> It may fall on states to allocate some of the federal monies received to respond to this need. The lack of funds could affect women who returned to work after the pandemic, especially those in rural areas.

Dana Thomson, a lead researchers of Child Trends on how the pandemic led to significant decline in child poverty, says a wealth of evidence “shows growing up in poverty impacts virtually every dimension of child development, from physical and mental health, as well as behavioral health, to educational attainment and labor market success as adults.”<sup>50</sup> Calls for a standard national program have been proposed so that all children would have equal access to the early child care that, according to experts, is critical to 85-90% of development of the brain.<sup>51</sup> Given that information, how can we not want all children to be treated equally? The LaVergne Police Department in Tennessee lined up for a five-year-old’s first day of school when her dad Kevin was killed. Kevin had been “crucial in helping with events for fallen officers and community events,” the other police officers explained. “When one of us hurts we all hurt.... We’re also a family making room to hear each other and individual voices.”<sup>52</sup> Is it possible legislators do not fully realize that for every four of the one million plus deaths in America from Covid, a child has lost a parent or caregiver?<sup>53</sup> Who will now address the anxiety and trauma of these young people? Who will see that they become educated adults and play productive roles in society? Who will be their families? Is this not precisely the time to demand a new normal that prioritizes child care for all families in our society so that all children receive care and mentoring? In Austin, Texas, an approach is being tried by Judge Jones of the 126<sup>th</sup> District in Family Law, who has responded to an absence of places to care for foster children, especially those in their teens. In order to meet the needs of some of these young people, the judge has paired with non-profits such as Safe Children Shelter.<sup>54</sup> Others trying to bridge this need are programs such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters. It seems in this era we should all be involved—as a village—in care for the young. Think of all the health workers, many of whom have been overworked to help with Covid and other emergencies. If our places of employment also had on-site daycare centers, those and other parents would be relieved by knowing their children had all day care and were relieved of having to pick them up to and from before going to work. A new leader in early childcare is New Mexico. Elected in 2018 on an early childhood platform, Gov. Michelle Lyjon Grisham has overseen New Mexico waiving all co-pays, making child care free for qualified families.<sup>55</sup> Approximately 70% more New Mexico families are now eligible for free child care, according to the Urban Institute, and reimbursement rates for care providers have nearly doubled to \$1,500/mo. per toddler. To fund its child care trust fund, the state passed a referendum and uses just a sliver of oil and gas profits.

The bipartisan Chips and Science Act offers a forward-thinking solution. \$200 billion has been invested over five years to help bring back semiconductor chip manufacturing from places like China.”<sup>56</sup> In February, the Commerce Department stated companies participating in the president’s research and manufacturing of Semiconductor Chips Act will have to provide access to affordable, high quality child care for their workers.<sup>57</sup> Making employers responsible for providing child care can be done with on-site child care, offering child care vouchers to employees, or alternative ways to address the need.<sup>58</sup> But Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo remarked that “CHIPS won’t be successful unless we expand the labor force. We can’t do that without affordable child care.”<sup>59</sup> In 2022, “child poverty hit a historic low of 5.2%”; in 2023, “the latest figures put it at 12.4 %, the same as the overall poverty rate, but 12.4% is more than double what it was.”<sup>60</sup> As a former professor of college age students, I am certain that young people want more adult nurturing and guidance about the paths on which they are journeying. And if college students have this need, then what about those even younger? There is urgent need for universal child care—ideally, partnerships among parents, educators, physical and mental health experts. We cannot technology people to resort to less positive forms of adults “having their backs.” Predators, drugs, guns, anger, cell phones, and other technology should not be their only guardians. Raising children is a responsibility of all parents as well as those in the communities, that “village,” in which the next generation will grow to adulthood. Thus, an inadvertently positive effect that staying at home during the pandemic may have had was to cause us to reevaluate the role of caregiving in our lives: to see the value of a parent being and working in the home—breadwinners and caregivers being mutually and equally important, or—for those spouses who want to work—quality, on-site child care at places of employment.